

Clifford Curzon was among the finest English pianists of the twentieth century, known for his clear, ego-less performances of the German Classical and Romantic masterpieces. A quiet intellectual who nevertheless possessed a formidable technique, Curzon played everything from Mozart to Liszt with equal authority. His fans often cite this ability to emphasize the personality of each composer, rather than his own, as his most distinctive quality. Curzon recorded for the Decca label for over 30 years, leaving behind a modestly sized, but musically impressive catalog. His recordings of Mozart and Schubert are considered his best.

Curzon achieved success early, with a scholarship to London's Royal Academy of Music in 1919. His impressive student career earned him every prize available to a pianist at the Academy, and he made his professional debut in 1923 -- playing Bach's Triple Concerto with conductor Henry Wood at a Promenade Concert in Queen's Hall. In 1926, when still just 19 years old, he was invited to join the RAM faculty; he remained on the faculty there until 1932, when he became a full-time performing pianist. During his time teaching at the RAM, Curzon spent several extended periods abroad studying with great pianists: first with Artur Schnabel in Berlin, and then with Wanda Landowska and Nadia Boulanger in Paris. In 1936, Curzon made a recital tour of Europe with violist Lionel Tertis, and in 1939, he made his U.S. debut at New York's Town Hall. By 1941, he was making records for Decca, beginning a relationship that would last almost to the end of his life.

Curzon was an exacting perfectionist, often refusing to allow the release of recordings he felt were imperfect. This included recordings of Mozart concertos with the likes of George Szell, István Kertész, and Benjamin Britten conducting. For this and other reasons, he earned a reputation for being difficult, and at times highly temperamental -- an irony, considering his generally retiring nature, and the restrained elegance of his playing. Curzon was knighted in 1977.

Brahms

Piano Concerto No. 1

Clifford Curzon, piano
George Szell / London Symphony Orchestra



Anton Hansch, 'Weite Flusslandschaft im Abendlicht' (1836)



Mastered in DSD256

Johannes Brahms was 20 years old when, in 1853, he first made the acquaintance of Robert Schumann through a letter of recommendation provided by the famous violinist Joseph Joachim. It was Schumann's unabashed praise of the music that Brahms showed him that, more than anything else, provided the young composer with the courage necessary to begin work on a full-scale symphony the next year. That courage, however, fell short in the end -- Brahms felt himself too inexperienced and was too haunted by the "footsteps of a giant" (Beethoven) to begin fruitful symphonic work -- and Brahms reorganized the material he had written as a sonata for two pianos. By 1858, this sonata for two pianos had itself been reborn as the Piano Concerto No. 1 in D minor, Op. 15.

The Piano Concerto No. 1 as we know it today is a complete reworking of the ideas and themes of the original duo-sonata source; much of it is completely new music. The premiere of the piece in January 1859 was not the failure that it is sometimes portrayed to have been, but the cold response at a follow-up performance in Leipzig left a bitter taste in Brahms' mouth that he never forgot -- Leipzig remained an enemy for the rest of his life.

The concerto is in three movements: *Maestoso*, *Adagio*, and *Allegro non troppo*. The orchestral exposition to the giant *Maestoso*

is mighty, epic, and tragic in no small portion; much later, a radiant, chorale-like second idea is offered by the soloist, who Brahms provides with the kind of rich, deep sonorities so characteristic of his piano writing. At the recapitulation, which is ushered in by a massive climax in which the pianist is forced to use all his/her strength to compete with the massive orchestral bursts, the pianist boldly takes over the mighty utterances that began the movement.

Brahms wrote the words "Benedictus qui venit in nomine Domini" at the head of the slow movement, but whether the words are an homage to Robert Schumann (whom Brahms sometimes called Domini), a portrait of Clara Schumann (the most popular interpretation, and one seemingly supported by a letter from Brahms to Clara), or some other reference is unknown.

The rondo-theme of the finale is introduced by the piano alone, and, later on, the soloist gets his/her one and only chance to impress the audience with a cadenza -- though it is dramatic necessity, not garish virtuosity, that demands the cadenza in the first place.

Brahms

Piano Concerto No. 1

Clifford Curzon, piano

George Szell / London Symphony Orchestra

1 Maestoso – Poco Più Moderato 22:11

2 Adagio 16:00

3 Rondo: Allegro Non Troppo 11:52

Total Time: 50:03

Recorded by Decca at Kingsway Hall, London, 30 May-1 June 1962

Producer John Culshaw Engineer Kenneth Wilkinson



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